

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2009 with funding from
Ontario Council of University Libraries

<http://www.archive.org/details/sketchesofsharon00hugh>

SKETCHES
OF
The Sharon Temple
and of its founder
DAVID WILLSON



PREPARED BY
JAMES L. HUGHES, LL.D.



Published by the
York Pioneer and Historical Society
Price 25 Cents

TORONTO:
Federal Printing Company
148 King St. West



PART I.

THE TEMPLE OF THE CHILDREN OF PEACE AT SHARON, YORK COUNTY, ONTARIO, CANADA.

The chief feature of Sharon is the conspicuous Temple, built by a local sect known as the "Children of Peace," founded by David Willson. This remarkable character, whose name is indelibly associated with the early days of Sharon, was American-born, of Presbyterian parentage, his native place being Dutchess County, in New York State. In his younger days he was a sailor. In 1801 he settled in Upper Canada, and after a few days became a member of the Hicksite branch of the Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, and adopted the profession of school teacher. On account of some peculiarities of belief or conduct he was disowned by the Quakers, and several others who held similar views withdrew from membership at the same time. The outcome of this secession was the establishment of a new body under the designation of the Children of Peace, of which Willson became the leader.

The Temple was built mainly during the winters of the years 1825 to 1830. Mr. Willson appealed to his people to work together in its erection and decoration. In addition to his appeals in prose he made the following appeal in poetry:

"Oh! friends and workmen, come to me,
If you accept the plan,
We'll build a throne of liberty,
An equal rest for man.
Exalted shall our tables be,
Our guests of every kind,
With deeds of great humanity
Descending from the mind."

It was designed to symbolize the mystical views held by the sect. In constructing the temple, Willson, in imitation of the method of building Solomon's temple, had the framework prepared at a distance, and put up without the use of tools as far as possible.

On the first Saturday in September in each year the Children of Peace held an annual feast. On the preceding evening the Temple was illuminated with over a hundred candles.

The following description of the Temple is taken by permission from "Landmarks of Toronto," published by the late Mr. John Ross Robertson:

"On the fair plain of Sharon, quietest of Ontario's hamlets, there still stands the strange Temple of Peace, in solemn loneliness, 'Ichabod' written over every pane and portal.

"It was David Willson, pioneer preacher, educator, architect, who here in the wilderness, working for righteousness, constructed for the worship of his Maker, buildings which bid fair to last well into their second century.

"In 1802 he came to this section in East Gwillimbury, some thirty-five miles north-east of York, and obtained a grant of land under the hand and seal of King George.

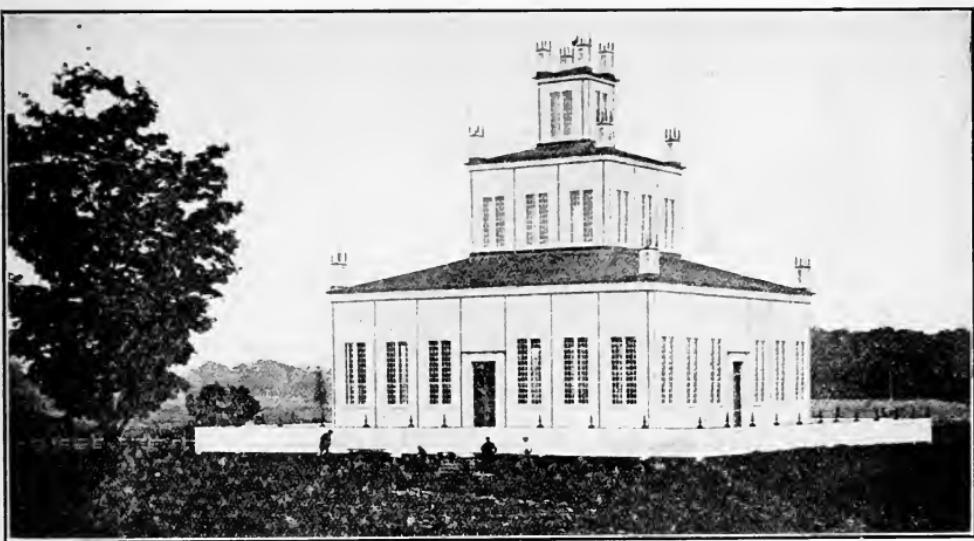
"After settling in Sharon, David Willson and his wife joined the Quakers, but the ways of worship did not suit the newcomer. He loved music and they did not. Other troubles came, and in 1812 Mr. Willson seceded. Half a dozen joined him, and the 'Davidites' or Children of Peace were organized.

"The little log building in which he preached to them did not satisfy the energetic man. He encouraged and enthused the people in the wish for a better place of worship. Like the Israelites, they 'gave willingly,' time, labor and money, and in 1819 the Music Hall, the first church of the sect, came into being. This was eventually torn down. In 1825 the Temple was begun.

"When you wander, a stranger, into the sleepy beauty of Sharon, and inquire concerning the Temple, you are always told to—

"'Ask Mrs. MacArthur. She knows most about it.' For not only does this lady remember from the standpoint of an eye-witness, but she has also collected statistics and compiled a pamphlet concerning the Children of Peace and their various buildings.

"'The Temple was never used on Sunday,' said Mrs. MacArthur, 'and was really opened only fifteen times during the year.'



THE TEMPLE OF PEACE, SHARON, ONTARIO,
AS IT APPEARED WHEN FIRST ERECTED

"The illumination took place the evening of the first Friday in September; a feast was held following this, and also after the first Friday in June. The first mentioned feast was that of the 'First Fruits.' The second was first instituted in honor of Mr. Willson's birthday, and afterwards as the 'Passover.'

"The building was also opened at Christmas, and on the last Saturday of each month, when the members gathered to remember with money and prayer, different objects of charity.

"It stands nears the north end of the village, this curious Temple with its sixty feet square of land surface, and its seventy-five feet of height.

"The interior is cut into four sections by aisles leading to the north, south, east, and west doors, placed exactly in the centre of each side. People from all points of the compass were expected to come here to worship. There are many windows—twenty-four to be exact—on this floor, above the high painted wainscoting, but nothing resembling a pulpit is to be seen—not even a desk except a long low one at one side which was used by the band.

"Some twenty feet away are the pillars each with the name of an apostle attached in letters of gold on band of black.

"The letters are half effaced now, yet still 'Philip' and 'Andrew' and 'John' with some of the other names are to be deciphered.

"Just within this square of pillars are four more, designated 'Faith,' 'Hope,' 'Love,' and 'Charity,' standing each at a corner of the aforementioned structure, altar, or rather perhaps ark, as David Willson no doubt intended it to be.

"This is a unique structure, not unlike a small pagoda, with high, peculiarly curved roof, tiny windows, and open doors through which one may see a large raised cushion of red, empty now save for a crimson scarf laid across it.

"Three hundred and sixty-five days did it take the Davidites to make this wonderful ark, choosing the beautiful inlaid walnut of which it is made with the utmost care, and putting it together with exquisite workmanship by hand, so that like Solomon's Temple, 'There was neither hammer nor axe nor tool of iron heard in the house while it was in building.'

"On square stands at each of the corners there rested at one time little lamps of pure gold, and inside on the cushion

there was a Bible, but both lamps and Bible were long ago taken from the place by thieving vandals.

"The two small tables spoken of above were used as receptacles for the collection, each person laying his or her offering upon them as they were carried by.

'A system of curves is carried out everywhere in the main building. The arches above the ark represent the rainbow—for every part of the architecture of the strange building is symbolic. The three storeys are emblematic of the Trinity, and the square base means 'square dealing with all the world.'

"The doors on east, west, south, and north meant that people should come in from every point of the compass on equal footing; the equal number of windows on each side of every door that the light of the gospel should go to all people; and when, on those September nights so long ago, the Children of Peace watched with heart-filled eyes the light of the candles leap up and shine out over wooded hill and plain, they looked forward earnestly, devoutly, to the time when the light of the Prince of Peace should illumine every dark corner of the broad earth.

"If you ascend the neatly painted ladder-like stairway to the second storey you will find more windows and a railed open space in the centre. There are benches here where the band used to sit. On the outside is another ladder leading to the third storey which was probably in days gone by scaled by many an adventurous youth who wished to examine more closely the big golden ball suspended in the centre of the tower.

"The word 'Peace' is inscribed upon the shining globe.

"The whole building is in a good state of preservation, as is evidenced by the sound flooring, which is one and three-quarter inches thick, and by the condition of all the woodwork.

"All the fastenings of the doors and windows are of wrought iron welded by hand, and are artistic. Perhaps most wonderful of all is the preservation of the shingles, which after nearly a century are still practically free from decay.

"The wintry nights of 1818 and '19 were notable ones in Sharon, for then the Davidites' choir was in its fullest tide of musical study. Many evenings during the winter, sleigh-loads of young people drove to the meeting house, where the choir met in the room above and joined in the singing.

"These same visitors, young and old, crowded to the feasts following the illumination. For those days and times, the feasts were well attended.

"The tables were spread in the meeting house and served by white-robed girls, who hurried in with platters of roast lamb and veal, potatoes, bread and butter, cheese and plum cake, pie and tea, the hungry diners partaking while the band played outside on the green.

"The September and Christmas feasts were a little different from that of June as given above. At these feasts the housewives provided roast fowl, bread and butter, 'pound' cake, cheese, and cranberry sauce.

"The Davidites were a quiet and industrious people, and very devout. They all worked willingly when the Temple was built. The little body never asked for financial assistance outside of their own congregations. During the earlier years, it was the custom for a number to go to Toronto and Markham Township to hold Sunday services. David Willson was the only minister they ever knew, and he gave his services free.

"Any surplus above that needed to keep the church in repair was always given to the poor. Mr. Willson once wrote: 'Our wants are few and simple,' and the lives of the people proved the truth of this assertion.

"The little congregation—numbering at one time nearly 300—grew and thrived, living true, upright lives in the midst of the community, giving help to poorer ones about.

"The life of David Willson, the leader who had so roused and energized the people of the place that here in the wilderness schools were organized, music given a prominent place, and remarkable structures built, ended January 16, 1866, at the age of 87 years, 7 months, and 12 days.

"He was laid to rest beside his wife in the cemetery a mile south of Sharon.

"The society began to dwindle then, though for a time the eldest son of the preacher, John David Willson, read the services, making use of the sermons and hymns written by his father, but in a few years people moved away, and the society became extinct.

"The last service held in the meeting house by the Children of Peace was in the month of August, 1886. For a time the 'Christians' took over the church and meeting-house under certain terms of agreement, but they did not live up to these terms, and the buildings fell again into absolute disuse."

Mainly through the efforts of President James L. Hughes, the Temple (and some five acres of land) was purchased in 1918 by the York Pioneer and Historical Society as an Historical House and Museum and community centre for York County, and after painting and thorough renovation, was opened on September 7th, the Harvest Home Feast Day of the Children of Peace. On the first Saturday in June of each year the Society holds a public meeting in the Temple, usually attended by crowds from Toronto and the surrounding country.

The Temple houses quite an interesting collection of relics and antiques—household and farm implements of the early days, fancy quilts, family portraits, old furniture, etc., and is open to visitors through the summer season for a small fee.

In the Park there are swings and horseshoe pitches, with ample room for tennis, baseball, lacrosse, picnic sports, and games of all sorts.



DAVID WILLSON
Founder of the Sect Known as "The Children of Peace"

PART II.

SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF **DAVID WILLSON**

About the middle of the 18th century there lived in Carrickfergus, County Antrim, Ireland, one Hugh Willson, a merchant and extensive dealer in linen, an occupation followed by his father before him. He had two sons, Hugh and John, who came to America in 1770. They landed in New York, then proceeded up the Hudson, and afterwards settled in Dutchess County, in the State of New York. Here David Willson (son of John) was born in the year 1780; here he grew to manhood, and married about the beginning of the 19th century Phoebe Titus. Soon after marriage he made a trip to Cuba, and on his return came to Canada, where he settled in the year 1801 on uncleared lands where is now the village of Sharon.

We will not dwell upon that trip, a portion of which was by Indian trail, or upon the privations and hardships incident to pioneer life. Being of a religious turn of mind, he became at once, on his arrival in Canada, identified with the Friends, as the most of the settlers in this region at that time were Quakers from Pennsylvania. David Willson was a ready and an impressive speaker. He advocated opinions, especially in regard to the use of music in religious services, that were not in accordance with those held by the Friends, for which he was formally expelled from the Society that gathered at that time for worship on Yonge Street. He, with three or four other families, then established the Children of Peace at Sharon. They held their meetings first in the houses of the settlers, afterwards in the school-house; but soon after erected what is known as the Old Meeting-House, and which was torn down some years ago.

A Scotch gentleman named Shirreff, in his book, "North America," gives the following account of his visit to Sharon and the impressions made on his mind by David Willson:

"Not finding Mr. Willson at his house, where we saw his wife, a thin, yellow, sickly-looking person, we proceeded to the counting-room (study), a fanciful building, which was open, and no one within. Mr. Willson being pointed out on the street, I introduced myself as a stranger anxious to see his place of worship,

to which he dryly assented. He asked if I belonged to government, and on learning the object of my tour, and place of residence, two men who accompanied him enquired anxiously about Scotland and the state of the working classes there. On entering the building we took off our hats, placing them on a table, and were told we might walk round the house.

"The building is of wood, painted white externally, seventy feet high, and consists of three storeys. The first is sixty feet square, with a door in the centre of each side, and three large windows on each side of the door. On two sides there is a representation of the setting sun, and the word 'Armageddon' inscribed below. The second storey is twenty-seven feet square, with three windows on each side, and the third storey nine feet square, with one window on each side. The corners of each of the storeys are terminated by square lanterns, with gilded mounting, and the termination of the building is a gilded ball of considerable size. The interior was filled with wooden chairs placed around sixteen pillars, in the centre of which is a square cabinet of black walnut, with a door and windows in each side. There was a table in the centre of the cabinet covered with black velvet, hung with crimson merina and fringe, on which was deposited a Bible. On the four centre pillars were painted the words, 'Faith, Hope, Charity, and Love'; and on the twelve others, the names of the Apostles. The centre pillars seemed to support the second storey, and at the foot of each was a table covered with green cloth. The house was without ornament, being painted fawn, green, and white, and had not a pulpit or place for addressing an audience. It is occupied only once in a month for collecting charity, contains more than 3,000 panes of glass, and is lighted once a year with 116 candles.

"There was a cold, suspicious reserve in Mr. Willson's manner, which prevented me at first engaging him in conversation. After fruitless attempts, I remarked the Temple was a handsome building, and he muttered in satirical sounds, 'We did not wish to raise a Temple; it is only a meeting-house.' I said the interior of the building was tastefully finished, and asked if the design was his own, when he repulsively replied, 'Did you ever see one like it?' On answering in the negative, he said, with a great deal of self-complacency, 'That is the work of the mind.' I had now a key to his good graces, which was used, and he conversed

freely on a variety of subjects. I had a publication in my pocket, entitled: 'Canada As It Is,' wherein he was mentioned; and on reading the particulars, he emphatically said: "Part of it is true—but three-fourths are lies." From seeing Mr. Owen's name in the book, he said he had his writings, and asked how he got on in Scotland. I stated shortly his later career, and he seemed pleased at hearing of the breaking up of New Harmony.

"David Willson seems about 65 years of age, and is a middle-sized, square-built man, wearing his hair over his forehead, and squints considerably. He reminded me of my early friend and preceptor, Edward Irving, but the association, in all probability, arose more from semblance of character than of feature. He was dressed in a short brown cloth jacket, white linen trousers, with a straw hat, all perhaps home-made. Originally from the State of New York, he had resided thirty years in this country. The number of his followers is unknown, but all offering themselves in sincerity are accepted, as he dislikes sectarianism, and has no written creed. He seems to act on Quaker principles, assisting the flock with money and advice. The produce is sent to York (Toronto) market weekly in common, yet individuals are left to guide themselves.

"There is a school for teaching young women to be industrious, whether they join the sect or not. Most people in the neighborhood say the 'Children of Peace' are good people."

Mr. Willson and his people were friends of an honest and economical administration of Government, and were strongly opposed to the Family Compact. Several of them were with Mr. Mackenzie in 1837. The Patriarch was not; yet he and his two sons were arrested and taken from their homes. The father was soon after released, but the two sons, Hugh D. and John D., were confined each five months in Toronto Jail, and the former was then taken to Kingston, where a further incarceration of seven months was endured. Few people now think less of David Willson because he saw the principles of justice and freedom so clearly as to disapprove of the Family Compact and sympathize with William Lyon Mackenzie in his unselfish purposes.

The following verses, written by Mr. Willson, were inspired by these distressing experiences—they are dated September 28, 1842:

As I behold the turning scale,
Reflection on my spirit bears:
I see my former thoughts prevail,
And Justice with my soul compare.

The binding cord—the prison chains
Are still impressive on my mind!
'Twas flowing blood wash'd out our stains,
Thro' sorrows now our joys we find.

Down the pale cheek the tears did flow:
At home the little Orphans cried:
Our rulers fill'd our hearts with woe,
That Justice to our Land denied.

The mother's groans, the sister's tears:
The parent's prayers and mournful sighs,
Repeating in our listening ears,
With scenes of grief before our eyes.

The sentence from the judgment seat,
That for our country some must die!
'Tis painful while I deeds repeat,
From those that sat, and reign'd so high.

The Exile wept in distant climes,
And for our country fill'd the grave;
But Heaven on earth has chang'd these times
And Providence come down to save.

Oh! could the slumbering eyes awake,
Or their cold blood from Earth arise;
A part with us in joys to take—
A recompense for sacrifice.

The Exile from his grave return:
Or were the far transported free,
Their hearts this day would cease to mourn
Their souls would bless our liberty.

Oh! may the chains for ever rust,
Our patriotic country wore:—
That sentence slumber in the dust,
That led them to the prison door.

Oh, may repentance clothe the mind
Of those that's been our country's foes:
Our Queen the liberal heart unbind,
And joy remove our piercing woes.

Oh, now may my reflection rest;
A time of peace to me is due:—
I see my frail exertions blest,
And comfort for the mourner too.

Neighbour may neighbour now unbind;
Nor more draw on the binding cord;
His deeds bear on his harden'd mind,
And cry for mercy from the Lord.

Mr. Willson knew as early as 1814 that he was disliked by the Family Compact, and that some even planned to have him sent from Canada. He accordingly published a document deprecating such action. It was headed: "Address to thy Crown, O England, and thy great name. I write as follows to all the inhabitants thereof." In the course of it he says: 'After I have written, I will leave God to judge between you and me; and also to make judge of you, whether you will receive my ministry in your land in peace, yea or nay . . . Ye are great indeed. I cannot help that, neither do I want to; but I am willing ye should remain great in the sight of God, although I am but small therein, in the things thereof. Now choose whether I should or might be your servant in these things, yea or nay. As I think, it would be a shame for a minister to be banished from your nation for preaching the gospel of peace therein. I am a man,' he continues, "under the visitation of God's power in your land; and many scandalous reports are in circulation against me. The intent of the spirit of the thing is to put me to flight from your dominions, or that I should be imprisoned therein. For which cause I, as a dutiful subject, make myself known hereby unto you of great estate in the world, lest your minds should be affected and stirred up against me without a cause by your inferiors, who seek to do evil to the works of God, whenever the Almighty is trying to do you good."

In some verses of the same date as this address to the Home authorities, viz., 1815, he refers to the peril he supposed himself to be in:

"The powers of hell are now combined—
With war against me rage;
But in my God my soul's resigned—
The rock of every age.

"If God doth give what I receive,
The same is due to thee;
And thou in spirit must believe
In gospel liberty.

"It's also mine, by George our King,
The ruler of my day;
And yet if I dishonour bring,
Cut short my feeble stay.

After a long and remarkably efficient leadership, during which he made a deep impression on North York, and was instrumental in founding schools for children, and for young women in domestic science, and industrial work and mechanical

training for young people of both sexes, David Willson, born in 1780, died in Sharon in 1866. He and his wife are buried in the graveyard south of Sharon.

As a religious man, David Willson was a progressive Quaker, with a deeply rooted and dominating consciousness of the glory and importance of the Jewish dispensation and of the need of its restoration.

The following statement, written by himself, reveals his peculiar mysticism, and also his attitude to the Jewish and to the Christian religion. Throughout his writings he speaks of Moses, David, and Jesus with practically equal reverence:

HIS VISION

"I apprehended I was called to retire into secret from all men. Accordingly I obeyed the call and went forth by myself. It was expressly spoken to me that if I would go I should see the angel of God. Half believing that such a thing should be, and still fearing the event of not going, I obeyed the command. According to divine promise I saw a beautiful young man clothed in a scarlet robe. My understanding was enlightened in a moment. This was the blood of Christ Jesus, and a mission for me, or rather an evidence of confirmation to what I had already too feebly believed. He stood at my left hand in reach of my person, and signified by motion this covering was for me. He gently stripped the garment from his own shoulders and laid it on mine, and told me that through the sorrows of sin I must minister to the Christian Church, and that this was redeeming blood that was laid upon me, which I must be baptized in. He disappeared from me naked and beautiful, and I saw him no more.

"I returned sincerely confirmed in the belief that I had received a holy mission from God. During the appearance of the solemn-countenanced angel, I was accompanied with sorrow concerning the fall of Jewish glory, once offered to God, and thought by this mantle I should have part in the restoration of the Christian Church only, and no part with the Jewish order in God's holy habitation.

"I will here note that I hitherto had received some hope in having part in the restoration of ancient glory, and therefore was the more grievously disappointed, as expecting by what I had received, I should have part in the Christian Church only.

But I sorrowed no longer than the dawning of the next morning light, when I received the same call and retired again, and I expressly saw the same person in another garment colored as the skies, ornamented with the lights of heaven wholly, and sparkling with unusual lustre, with a border of gold compassing the mantle round about. I then stood in difficulty in my situation to know what was to be done with it, for I knew as before at the appearance it was God's visitation of great mercy to the restoring of ancient glory, which is long fallen. In an exceeding careful and gentle manner, he lifted up the first covering and placed the other in like manner as he had done before, under it, and I saw that Jewish glory was nearest my heart, and the last visitations of God to His people, and that He would come hereafter, and dwell with them Himself, and receive all glory; I now had received an assurance that I had part both in present and ancient order, but that I must first ornament the Christian Church with all the glory of Israel and afterwards become nothing myself therein, but resign all to God's protection, for He, after me, would take care of His own people."

He was original, independent, and progressive, this stern yet helpful Irishman—who possessed many of the qualities of the best type of Irish character. He was earnest, forceful, and practical, yet he was a mystic who saw visions. With a very limited education and less special training of his mind, he was a logical thinker with power to express his thoughts in a clear and forceful way. With no training in architecture, he yet erected two remarkable buildings.

He was a born leader. His people held him in reverence and co-operated with him with a grateful joy. They gave their money and time freely to carry out his plans. They worked for nearly six years in the winter time to finish the Temple.

He was a thoughtful educator. He had a clear view of the utility and character development of industrial training for young people of both sexes. He not only organized a school for the education of children, but he built a Young Woman's House for the practical training of the young women of the district, whether they belonged to his own people or not.

He pleaded with his followers to make their children of both sexes mechanics in at least one department of practical

life. He was a good workman himself. The books he bound show that he was an excellent book binder.

He had a profound reverence for the ancient Israelites, and hoped to help to restore their ancient glory.

He was a true and fearless man who mercilessly attacked the public men who were corrupt or selfish. He was a true democrat; a democrat with a vision of the brotherhood of man.

He wrote three hymn books, and some books in prose, among them "Willson's Impressions of the Mind," and "Letters to the Jews."

Some people say that "the work of David Willson has ended, because the sect he founded no longer exists." He did not really aim to found a sect. He did not believe in sects. He organized his neighbors for religious study and for the practice of religious principles in their daily lives.

His work was too vital to die. His meeting house was torn down, his Temple has not been used for many years for the purposes for which it was erected, but no moral or truly religious force ever dies.

